

DAVID BRAINERD: A FLAME FOR GOD

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The following biographical sketch is from *Heroes of Faith on Pioneer Trails* by E. Myers Harrison, former pastor of Judson College Church, Rangoon, Burma; copyright 1945 by Moody Bible Institute. These are excellent stories to read in family devotions or to use in other contexts with children. It is important to keep the Greatest Work on Earth, which is missionary work, before our children and youth and to pray that the Lord will send forth laborers into His harvest. The essence of fruitful Christian living is death to self and surrender to God's will, and few things exhibit this more powerfully than sacrificial missionary work. Sadly, very few Bible believing Christians today are familiar with the challenging stories of influential pioneer missionaries of past days.

A frail young man, with sad, lustrous eyes and face so blanched that he seems to be the palest of the palefaces, is engaged on a serious and dangerous mission. Having heard of a tribe of particularly ferocious Indians living in the dense forests of the region known as the "Forks of the Delaware," he is on his way to tell them of a loving Saviour. Coming at sunset in sight of the smoke of their campfires, he decides to spend the night in the woods and to proceed in the morning. Little does he realize that several red men, with wolfish eyes and as silent as serpents, have followed him for hours. As he builds a fire, the Indians steal away to their encampment to tell the startling news that a white man is in the woods nearby. "Let us go at once," says the chief, "and kill this paleface, whose people have taught us to drink firewater and then, while we are drunk, have taken our baskets and skins and even our lands for almost nothing."

As the warriors silently draw near, they see the white man on his knees, praying most fervently that the Indians might come to realize that the great God of the universe loved them and sent His Son to save them. While he prays, a rattlesnake squirms up to him, lifts its hideous head, flicks its forked tongue close to his face, and then, for no apparent reason, glides away into the darkness. And so does the chief, followed by his men.

When the young missionary enters the Indian village early the next morning, he receives a much more cordial welcome than he had anticipated, for not until later does he learn of the strange events of the preceding night. When the people gather around him in an open place among the wigwams, he opens his Bible, reads from the 53rd chapter of Isaiah and tenderly tells the sweet story of how God sent His Son to die on the cross that He might take away the sin from people's hearts and make them good children of the Heavenly Father. At the close of his message there are tears in the eyes of many of his auditors.

"The paleface is a praying man!" remarks one of the warriors who had gone forth the preceding night intending to kill him.

"And the Great Spirit is with him!" says another, remembering how the rattlesnake had mysteriously failed to strike.

"And he brings a wondrous sweet message!" says the squaw of the Indian chief.

A MAN IN A MILLION

This young paleface was David Brainerd. He was born at Haddam, Connecticut, April 20, 1718, and died on October 9, 1747, at the early age of 29. He is remembered not only as the great Apostle to the North American Indians, but also as a chief source of inspiration in the lives of thousands who have been challenged from ease and selfishness to lives of holiness and sacrifice, as they have prayed and wept over his Journal.

"Have a good look at him," writes F. W. Boreham; "he is a man in a million; he did more than any other to usher in the world's new day."

"His story," as J. M. Sherwood says, "has done more to develop and mold the spirit of modern missions, and to fire the heart of the Christian Church, than that of any man since the apostolic age."

In answer to the question, "What can be done to revive the work of God where it has decayed?" John Wesley said, "Let every preacher read carefully the life of David Brainerd."

One of the many who heeded Wesley's counsel was William Carey, and God used Brainerd's life story to open Carey's eyes to the need of all races everywhere and to fire his heart with a passion to spread the gospel to "the uttermost part" (Acts 1:8). It was chiefly the reading of the story of Brainerd's heroic missionary labors that thrust Henry Martyn out as a bundle of fire into the darkness of India and Persia, and caused Robert McCheyne to become the Apostle to the Jews. May some earnest-hearted young people reading this account be similarly inspired to "burn out for God" in some needy foreign land. May many others be shaken out of living, as Brainerd says, "at the rate of common Christians," and be inspired to live lives of fervent prayer, genuine piety and holy passion for souls. And may any hearts without Christ be melted into penitence and saving faith as they read of God's marvelous love revealed in His dear Son.

HIS TEXT AND CONVERSION

Tradition says that Mary, the mother of Jesus, could never bear to read the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, and if another should read it in her hearing, she would break into weeping, as with grief inconsolable. This passage was as bitter wormwood to her soul because it brought to her mind a vivid recollection of that day when, through a fountain of tears, she beheld her divine Son suffer and die on the cross.

Isaiah 53 reminded Mary of the tortures in Pilate's hall!

Isaiah 53 caused her to remember the horrors of the Via Dolorosa!

Isaiah 53 brought to her a vivid recollection of the sorrows of Golgotha!

Isaiah 53 was a fountain of wormwood to her soul!

But in this attitude Mary stands singularly alone. To a multitude that no man can number the 53rd chapter of Isaiah has been precious beyond all estimation.

It must have been so to the Ethiopian eunuch, ever after that memorable day when Philip stepped into his chariot in the desert and, reading about the Man of Sorrows, smitten and afflicted, "preached unto him Jesus" (Acts 8:35).

This passage was very dear to the heart of Philip Melanchthon, Luther's valiant helper. On the last Good Friday of his life, he prepared and delivered his last sermon. And the theme of that final message was the 53rd chapter of Isaiah!

John Knox prized this chapter more than any other. He often preached upon it and, during his last illness, requested that it be read to him every day.

Dwight L. Moody was of one mind with Knox and Melanchthon in appreciation of Isaiah's inspired description of the Suffering Servant. When the great evangelist went to conduct his first campaign in London in 1874, he was asked concerning his creed. "It is already in print," replied Mr. Moody. "You'll find it in the 53rd chapter of Isaiah."

The 53rd chapter of Isaiah was exceedingly precious to David Brainerd. When his soul was enveloped in blackness, the 53rd chapter of Isaiah became a ladder of light leading from earth to heaven. When preaching to the Indians, his favorite theme was Isaiah 53. And, when he came to the end of his pilgrimage, the last sentence of the last entry he made in his Diary was a quotation from the 53rd chapter of Isaiah!

At the early age of eight, as he himself expressly states, David came under "a conviction of sin," and subsequently, for prolonged periods, his heart was filled with the most melancholy forebodings. He was terrified at the thought of death and often pictured

himself descending into hell. His mood was like that of John Bunyan when under deep conviction.

Said Bunyan:

"I envied the toads in the ditch and the domesticated animals, for they had no soul to perish as mine was like to do."

Said Brainerd: "I was much dejected and sometimes envied the birds and beasts their happiness, because they were not exposed to eternal misery as I knew myself to be."

It is interesting to note that John Wesley on one side of the Atlantic and David Brainerd on the other were, at about the same time, passing through a similar religious experience. Just as Wesley, prior to his conversion at Aldersgate, sought spiritual peace by joining others in the Holy Club in a continual round of religious observances, so Brainerd sought to satisfy his soul's deep need of regeneration with the husks of external piety. He attended church services faithfully, read the Scriptures through twice in a single year and joined a group of young men meeting weekly for prayer and Bible study. Others may have been deceived by his zeal, but he was not. "I had a very good outside," he says. "Thus I proceeded a considerable length on a self-righteous foundation."

Eventually the sublime truths embedded in the 53rd chapter of Isaiah guided his wretched soul through the Wicket Gate and to the sight of the Cross, where his burden, like Bunyan's, rolled away to be seen no more.

The 53rd chapter of Isaiah did three things for David Brainerd. It revealed to him his own heart, full of vileness and corrupted by sin. He not only assented to the statement, "all we like sheep have gone astray" (Isa. 53:6); he also came to see that only a terrible disease, humanly incurable, would have called forth so great a remedy as the death of God's Son on the Cross. Thus he was led to recognize that his indispensable need was not deeds of external righteousness but the divine remedy of a new birth for the disease of a corrupted nature. He finally realized that no struggles or reforms could change his sin-corrupted nature and that the Law of God--to quote his own words--"condemned me, not for outward actions but for the sins of my heart; which I could not possibly prevent."

The 53rd of Isaiah also revealed to him the Saviour's heart, full of love and the excellencies of grace. When, in Bunyan's epic story, Christiana's son James had read the 53rd of Isaiah as a part of family worship, Greatheart sought to explain the majestic syllables, "he hath no form nor comeliness . . . a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:2,3). These words were written, said Mr. Greatheart, "for those who lack the eye that can see into our Prince's heart." The 53rd chapter of Isaiah was like an open window, enabling Brainerd to peer into the heart of the Prince of our salvation, and what he saw there melted his heart. His vision of the Saviour's broken heart broke his own

heart into penitence and glad surrender. It was on Sunday evening, July 12, 1739, "as I was walking in a dark thick grove," he writes in his Diary, "unspeakable glory seemed to open to the view and apprehension of my soul. My soul was so captivated with the excellency, loveliness, greatness, and other perfections of God that I was even swallowed up in Him." On that never-to-be-forgotten day Brainerd found in the Saviour's riven heart a stairway of light leading to the Holy of Holies in the heart of God.

The 53rd of Isaiah also revealed to him a door of access to the heart of all mankind. Having seen the need of his own depraved heart, he saw a world of hearts in the same dark plight, and having found that the message of the suffering Son of God was "wondrous sweet" to his own soul, he believed that all other souls were eagerly waiting to hear the same sweet story. He was convinced that Christ is the answer--the only answer--to the deepest yearnings of the human spirit, just as water is the answer to the thirst of the human body. Believing that others were just as thirsty as he had been, he longed to proclaim far and wide, especially among the neglected and mistreated Indians, the gospel invitation, "And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17).

HIS MISSIONARY LABORS

Accordingly, after three years of study at Yale College, he became a missionary to the Indians, under appointment of the Scottish Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

On the way to his work among the Indians at Kaunaumee, New York, he stopped and preached at Montauk, Long Island, at that time chiefly inhabited by Indians; and what was his text? He says:

"I went and preached from Isaiah 53--'Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin,' " (Isa. 53:10).

Jesus' death on the cross was part of the divine plan: "It pleased the Lord to bruise him."

Jesus' death on the cross was the costly remedy for a terrible disease: ". . .an offering for sin."

Jesus' death on the cross would be divinely used to the salvation of multitudes: "the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand" and "justify many" (Isa. 53:10,11).

Several months after reaching Kaunaumee, the young missionary set aside a day "for secret fasting and praying from morning till night." Thus far he felt that his work had been a failure. He was overwhelmed by a sense of his own unworthiness and of the obstacles confronting him, chiefly, the depravity of the Indians and the weakened condition of his own pain-racked, consumptive body. He read extensive passages from

the Bible, "frequently in the meantime," he states, "falling on my knees and crying to God." As he read of the worthies of old and of how marvelously God had used them, he longed to be like them. That day the pattern of his amazing life was formed, as he solemnly consecrated himself to walk in the footsteps of four of the heroes of the Bible. "O that I may be, as were they, aflame for God," he prayed. That night he wrote in his Diary, "My soul blessed God that He had shown Himself so gracious to His servants of old."

Brainerd longed to be AFLAME FOR GOD, living, like Moses, a life of self-abasement to His service and glory.

When God spoke out of the burning bush in Midian, He found Moses very different from what he was forty years earlier. Then he was self-assertive, endeavoring to deliver his enslaved brethren by his own hand and by his own ill-chosen methods. Now he was self-abased, conscious of his inadequacy and unworthiness. "Who am I," he said, "to undertake so great a task?" God could and did use mightily one thus yielded and eager, not for self-glory but for the glory of God. No man ever yearned more ardently to be like Moses, or succeeded to a greater degree, than did David Brainerd. "I spent the evening," he says, "praying incessantly that I might not be self-dependent but have my whole dependence upon God." In a letter to his brother, January 2, 1744, he wrote:

"We should always look upon ourselves as God's servants, placed in God's world to do His work; and accordingly labor faithfully for Him. Let it then be your great concern, thus to devote yourself and your all to God."

His Diary contains innumerable passages of similar import to the following. "April 26, 1742. Oh, that I could spend every moment of my life to God's glory!" "August 30, 1742. My soul longs with a vehement desire to live to God." "November 22, 1745. I have received my all from God. Oh that I could return my all to God." Not in self-dependence but in God-dependence, Brainerd found the source of unlimited power, the secret of a gallant spirit, the sacrament of inward peace.

Self-abasement was not to Brainerd an end in itself. "It is so sweet," he confides, "to be nothing and less than nothing" that Christ may be "my all in all."

Oh, the bitter shame and sorrow That a time could ever be When I let the Saviour's pity Plead in vain, and proudly answered:

"All of self, and none of Thee."

Yet He found me: I beheld Him Bleeding on the accursed tree; Heard Him pray, "Forgive them, Father," And my wistful heart said faintly:

"Some of self and some of Thee."

Day by day, His tender mercy, Healing, helping, full and free, Sweet and strong, and oh, so patient, Brought me lower, while I whispered:

"Less of self and more of Thee."

Higher than the highest heaven, Deeper than the deepest sea, Lord, Thy love at last has conquered: Grant me now my soul's desire,

"None of self and all of Thee."

Brainerd longed to be AFLAME FOR GOD, being, like Elijah, a man fervent and mighty in prayer.

His soul "was much moved" as he read the story of Elijah the prophet, who, by laying hold upon God in prayer, was sustained in all his trials and was enabled to overcome the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel, to call a multitude to repentance and to bring down rain upon a famished earth. Thereupon, says Brainerd: "My soul breathed after God, and pleaded with Him, that 'a double portion of that spirit' which was given to Elijah, might 'rest on me'" (See 2 Kings 2:9).

He usually spent several hours a day in prayer and frequently devoted an entire day to this purpose. June 14, 1742, he writes: "I set apart this day for secret fasting and prayer. Just at night the Lord visited me marvelously. I wrestled for an ingathering of souls . . . I was in such an agony from sun half an hour, till near dark, that I was all over wet with sweat. Oh, my dear Saviour did sweat blood for poor souls. I went to bed with my heart wholly set on God."

Brainerd discovered the reality of prayer: "The Lord visited me marvelously."

Brainerd experienced the agony of prayer: "I wrestled for souls . . . in agony."

Brainerd discerned the resources of prayer: "The treasures of divine grace were opened to me."

Brainerd learned the transforming power of prayer: "My heart was wholly set on God."

July 21, 1744, on hearing that the Indians were planning to hold an idolatrous feast and dance the next day, he spent a day and night in prayer. He writes: "This morning about nine I withdrew to the woods for prayer. I was in such anguish that when I rose from my knees I felt extremely weak and overcome, and the sweat ran down my face and body . . .

I cared not where or how I lived, or what hardships I went through, so that I could but gain souls for Christ. I continued in this frame all the evening and night."

Thus empowered, he went forth to meet the Indians the next morning, convinced that God was with him in this contest just as He was with Elijah on Mount Carmel; and, wonder of wonders, instead of promptly scalping him when he called upon them to stop their dance, they actually desisted and listened to the missionary preach, both morning and afternoon.

Made strong by prayer and the awareness of the divine companionship, Brainerd dragged his tortured body through the forests from village to village, preaching with such tenderness and conviction that the stony-hearted Indians were frequently melted to tears.

Brainerd longed to be AFLAME FOR GOD, his life, like Abraham's, being characterized by the holy piety of one on pilgrimage to eternity.

In his Diary Brainerd makes frequent reference to the ancient patriarch. He spoke of "Abraham's pilgrimage" and of "what a stranger he was here on earth." He longed to be like Abraham and the worthies referred to in Hebrews 11:13, who "confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth." As a citizen of heaven, he felt that he should be insensible to the enjoyments of this world. "My desires," he wrote on July

19, 1742, "seem especially to be after weanedness from the world, perfect deadness to it, and that I may be crucified to all its allurements. My soul desires to feel itself more of a pilgrim and stranger here below, that nothing may divert me from pressing through the lonely desert, till I arrive at my Father's house."

Being on such a pilgrimage, he was filled with the most intense longings after holiness and sanctification. "Blessed Jesus," he prayed, "may I daily be more and more conformed to Thee. All I want is to be more holy, more like my dear Lord . . . that I may be fit for the blessed enjoyments and employments of the heavenly world." As a "pilgrim here below," Brainerd was animated by a threefold yearning: to be crucified to the allurements of this world, to be conformed daily to the holy purposes of Christ, to be made fit for the enjoyments and employments of heaven!

Brainerd frequently felt himself cast down into the dust because of his sinfulness and spiritual deadness. "What a vile wretch I am!" he exclaims. "Oh that I could give up myself to God, so as nevermore to attempt to be my own, or to have any will or affections that are not perfectly conformed to Him! But alas, alas! I find I cannot be thus entirely devoted to God."

Few men have ever exposed their inmost souls as did Brainerd; and yet it should be remembered that he had no idea that any other eye than his own would ever see his

private writings. If a saint is one who lives in time with a view to eternity, no saintlier man ever lived than David Brainerd. "I love to live," he said, "on the brink of eternity."

Brainerd longed to be AFLAME FOR GOD, living, like Paul, to preach Christ and to share His sufferings unto the salvation of souls.

His Diary contains this entry, July 6, 1744: "I long and love to be a pilgrim; and want grace to imitate the life, labors and sufferings of Paul among the heathen." He and Paul were kindred spirits in being captivated and animated by one great design-the salvation of lost souls, and in believing that this objective could best be attained by preaching the gospel of Christ and by living a life of self-denial and sacrifice.

Brainerd and Paul were kindred spirits!

Captivated by one grand design--"to testify the gospel of the grace of God."

Animated by one superb longing- "to fill up that which is lacking of the sufferings of Christ."

"I long to imitate the life, labors and sacrifices of Paul among the heathen."

Almost every page of Brainerd's Diary tells how he endured "hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (2 Tim. 2:3). His sufferings, caused by a diseased and weakened constitution, were intensified by the rigors of his life among the Indians and his arduous travels through the wilderness. Concerning his first night among the Indians, he made this entry, "I rode to Kaunaumeeek and there lodged on a little heap of straw."

He was frequently in distress for lack of suitable food, exposed to hunger and cold, lost in the forests, caught in storms with no shelter available, obliged to ford raging streams and to spend the night in the woods, in peril from wild beasts and wild savages. Concerning one such incident he relates, "About six at night I lost my way in the wilderness, and wandered over rocks and mountains, through swamps and most dreadful places. I was pinched with cold and distressed with an extreme pain in my head and stomach, so that much blood came from me. But God preserved me, and, blessed be His name, such fatigues and hardships as these seem to wean me more from the earth and I trust will make heaven the sweeter."

This man was no secluded saint. He was apostolic in his labours and in the way he glorified in tribulation.

Brainerd's health was failing fast and he gave some consideration to the idea of giving up his missionary journeys and settling down, either among his Christian Indians or at one of the white churches which had extended to him a call. This prospect was immeasurably

enhanced by his dreams of domestic felicity, for he was ardently attached to Jerusha Edwards. He realized, however, that he had at most a year or two longer to live, and concluded, after much struggle of soul, that he should "burn out to the last" as a traveling missionary. Falling on his knees in his resignation, he cried: "Farewell friends and earthly comforts; farewell to the dearest, the very dearest of them all. I will spend my life to my latest moments in caves and dens of the earth, if the kingdom of Christ may thereby be advanced."

During the last months of his life, Jerusha was his nurse and constant companion; and so heartbroken was she at the death of her beloved, she faded like a flower famished for rain, and, just four months later, went to join him in the Celestial City.

Brainerd, like Paul, gloried in the Cross and determined to preach nothing "save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). He made Christ the center and goal of every message. "If I treated on the being and glorious perfections of God," he wrote, "I was thence naturally led to discourse of Christ as the only way to the Father. If I attempted to open the deplorable misery of our fallen state, it was natural from thence to show the necessity of Christ to undertake for us, to atone for our sins and to redeem us from their power." The Apostle to the Indians proved, not only that the preaching of "gospel truth" is the only thing that can melt savage hearts to repentance, but also is the only means by which to reform and transform their lives. Just as soon as the Indians were changed at heart, they gave up their heathen vices.

At the end of one year of labor at Kaunaumeeek, Brainerd persuaded the Indians to move to Stockbridge, where they came under the ministry of a Mr. Sargeant and later of Jonathan Edwards. Henceforth his parish centered in the area of the forks of the Delaware and extended through wide areas of New Jersey and Pennsylvania. He made the Indian town of Crossweeksung his headquarters and there erected a little hut. For a considerable time he was greatly depressed by the heathen practices of the Indians, by the darkness of their minds and the hardness of their hearts. But he kept on sowing the gospel seeds and watered them with his tears, for he believed "the promises of God." Often he retired into the forest recesses, and the leafy solitudes echoed with the pleadings of his anguished heart on behalf of his "poor Indians."

The promises! The sure promises of God! "Sow in tears . . . reap in joy!" "Call upon me and I will answer!" Echoes among the leafy solitudes! Pleadings of his anguished heart!

At length a mighty revival broke out in Susquehannah, and the reaper with joy gathered the precious sheaves. One day while preaching on Isaiah 53, "the Word was attended with amazing power; many scores in that great assembly were much affected, so that there was a very great mourning among them." Suddenly there fell among the Indian population of this area a sense of soul concern. From all directions they came, crowding around the missionary to hear his message and falling down with sobs and groans under conviction

of sin. A besotted woman fell down crying, "Have mercy upon me, O Lord." An elderly man, who had been a murderer, a pow-wow (or conjuror), and a notorious drunkard, cried for mercy with many tears. Scores were soundly converted and came to be known as "Praying Indians," for, like their missionary, they spent much time in importunate prayer for the salvation of their people. And what was the message that produced such remarkable results? When one of the men was asked, "Why do you cry so?" he replied, "When I think how Christ was slain like a lamb and spilt His blood for sinners, I cannot help crying." It was the message of Isaiah 53! And when Brainerd called his Christian Indians together for their first communion and talked to them of the great sacrifice represented by the sacred emblems, the whole company was dissolved in tears.

SWEEPING THROUGH THE GATES

During the conversation in the Palace Beautiful, Christian confessed that he sometimes lost his ardor on the pilgrimage. When Prudence inquired how he was enabled to revive his heart and press on his journey, Christian replied, "When I think of where I am going—that will do it!" It was the same with David Brainerd.

After five years of arduous travel, manifold hardships, and almost incessant pain, the frail consumptive, spitting blood and almost delirious with fever, stumbles down the road to Northampton to die in the home of Jonathan Edwards. But he is by no means despondent. He is thinking of where he is going and his soul is exultingly happy. The pilgrim has finished his course and waits eagerly for the chariot to take him home. When someone comes into his room with a Bible, he exclaims: "Oh, that dear Book! I shall soon see it opened! The mysteries that are in it will all be unfolded!"

As his physical powers wane, his spiritual perception heightens. "I was made for eternity," he whispers. "How I long to be with God and to bow in His presence." The light of another world is in his eyes as he murmurs, "Oh that the Redeemer may 'see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied.' Oh come, Lord Jesus! Come quickly!" And with this petition upon his lips he greets Death as a long-awaited friend, who will forthwith usher him into the presence of the King!

Brainerd's Diary and Journal reveal an ardent and oft reiterated yearning to "burn out" for his Lord and to be "aflame for God." "It is my fervent longing," he said, "to be a flame of fire, continually glowing in the divine service, till my latest, my dying moment."

To the very last, Brainerd was supremely concerned with the extension of the kingdom of his "blessed Redeemer," the suffering Christ of Isaiah 53.

On his deathbed he prayed that He who "was bruised for our iniquities" might "see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied" (Isa. 53:5, 11). October 9, 1747, he experienced the ineffable joy, which, in prospect, had so long cheered his lonely and heroic

pilgrimage-namely, "to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." (II Cor. 5:8).

The flame that burned so brightly and glowed so warmly seems to have burned out at last. But it only seems so. Death is life's sublimest illusion. For those "in Christ" there is no death, there are no dead. The event called death does not extinguish, but rather intensifies, the vital flame of life and service. "He is not dead." The sweet and consecrated spirit of David Brainerd is "continually glowing in the divine service" and, to a degree beyond all his imagining, he is still AFLAME FOR GOD.

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